



Collaborative Problem Solving can transform school discipline

Adults, students, and schools benefit when behavioral challenges are viewed through accurate lenses and students participate in resolving them.

By Ross W. Greene

We've been looking in all the wrong places for answers to solving student discipline issues. Over the past 40 to 50 years, we theorized that poor parental discipline caused children's challenging behavior. During the same time, psychiatric diagnoses became a standard way to understand, communicate about, and categorize challenging behavior and is a critical component in placement determinations for special education services. Coinciding with these developments is a rather troubling trend: Public school discipline rates are roughly double today what they were in the 1970s and have never been higher. Correlation does not equal causation, but the possibility that these trends are associated can't be overlooked. We're compelled to take a fresh look at what we're thinking about and doing to behaviorally challenging students.

When schools believe that lax parental discipline explains a child's misbehavior, educators are less likely to consider alternative explanations for the misbehavior and the full range of interventions that could be

Lagging skills provide a far more informative, compassionate, productive set of lenses than do diagnoses.

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implemented at school. And when psychiatric diagnoses are invoked to “explain” behavior problems, there’s a tendency to pathologize kids, implying that the “problem” resides within the child and that it’s the child who needs fixing. Diagnoses often distract adults from identifying the true factors underlying challenging behaviors and the specific conditions in which those behaviors are most likely to occur. Indeed, there’s a tendency to confuse diagnoses with explanations:

Teacher: Why does Billy have a restricted range of interests, exhibit repetitive, stereotypical behaviors, and have such difficulties in his social interactions?

Diagnostician: Because he has Asperger’s disorder.

Teacher: How do you know he has Asperger’s disorder?

Diagnostician: Because he has a restricted range of interests, exhibits repetitive, stereotypical behaviors, and has significant difficulties in his social interactions.

Fortunately, something else has occurred over the past 40 to 50 years: the unequivocal finding that behaviorally challenging kids are lacking crucial develop-

mental skills. Rather than simply stating that a student “has oppositional defiant disorder,” for example, adults can now consider, discuss, and identify the “lagging skills” that contribute to the behaviors (refusing to do as he’s told, throwing tantrums, and defying adult rules and requests) that comprise the disorder. Thus, we can now say things like, “He has tremendous difficulty appreciating the effect of his behavior on others,” or “He has a lot of trouble taking into account situational factors

that would require an adjustment in a plan of action,” or “He has difficulty handling unpredictability, ambiguity, uncertainty, and novelty.” Lagging skills provide a far more informative, compassionate, productive set of lenses than do diagnoses.

Lagging skills are particularly problematic — and likely to lead to challenging behavior — when they’re demanded by the environment. A student who has difficulty shifting from one activity or task to another isn’t likely to run into difficulty when transitions aren’t being demanded by the environment. He is likely to run into trouble (and exhibit challenging behavior) when the environment does demand transitions. A student who has difficulty initiating conversations or entering groups isn’t likely to run into difficulty until the environment demands these skills.

These notions lead to several important realities:

- Challenging students aren’t always challenging. They’re challenging when the demands being placed upon them outstrip their skills to respond to those demands.
- Challenging episodes are actually highly predictable.

How can such thinking influence school discipline programs? If students with challenging behavior lack crucial developmental skills, then we can respond to their difficulties in much the same way that we respond to academic learning challenges. If it’s lagging skills — and not lax parental discipline — that contribute to challenging behavior, then school staff can be empowered to help these students rather than rely on explanations that leave them largely powerless to intervene. If school faculty focus on identifying the lagging skills that underlie students’ challenging behavior — rather than relying on psychiatric diagnoses, which really explain very little — then their understanding of challenging behavior can be more compassionate and more accurate. We can blame and pathologize less and appreciate the complex factors that give rise to challenging behavior more. School discipline programs can focus on teaching lagging skills and solving problems rather than on incentive-based interventions and punitive procedures such as detention, suspension, and expulsion. And, perhaps, we wouldn’t now be saying that public school discipline rates have never been higher.

COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

The concepts above are components of Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS), a cognitive-behavioral model of intervention that I originated in my book, *The Explosive Child*, and described further in another book, *Lost at School*. At the heart of the CPS process, adults learn different ways of understanding challenging behavior, communicating with challenging students, and working together to durably solve the problems that set challenging behaviors in motion.

Hundreds of schools have used *Lost at School* in book studies and, to varying degrees, have tried to implement the CPS model. Schools that have implemented the model with fidelity have seen dramatic improvements in the behavior of individual students and in student-teacher interactions and have, in the aggregate, often seen significant reductions in rates of discipline referrals, detentions, and suspensions.

CPS is built around a few important themes:

Kids do well if they can. This crucial theme encapsulates the belief that if a student *could* do well, he *would* do well and that if a student isn’t meeting

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behavioral or academic expectations, lagging skills must be interfering. Identifying the specific lagging skills that contribute to a child's challenging behavior is one of the crucial tasks involved in understanding and helping that child.

Doing well is preferable to not doing well. When a student isn't meeting academic or behavioral expectations, adults tend to assume the student isn't motivated. Adults then assign blame to personality traits — attention seeking, manipulative, coercive, unmotivated, limit testing, button pushing — and apply strategies to give a student the incentive to do well. Actually, the student would do well if he had the skills because doing well is preferable.

Challenging behavior must be viewed in the context of a child's development. This theme is a reminder that challenging behavior doesn't occur in a vacuum. It occurs in the context of lagging developmental skills. This is a crucial change in lens for many adults.

Behind every challenging behavior is a lagging skill and a demand for that skill. Unsolved problems refer to specific situations in which a student's lagging skills clash with the demands of the environment, thereby heightening the likelihood of challenging behavior. In schools, common unsolved problems include getting started on an assignment; completing an assignment; participating appropriately in circle time; behaving adaptively in the hallway, on the school bus, at recess, and/or at lunch; getting along with a peer; and interactions with a teacher. Another of the crucial tasks involved in helping a behaviorally challenging student is to identify the specific unsolved problems that precipitate challenging episodes.

Problems should be solved proactively rather than emergently. All too often, intervention for behaviorally challenging students occurs in the heat of the moment or immediately thereafter. Because unsolved problems are highly predictable, solving problems before they occur is far preferable and more productive.

Problems should be solved collaboratively rather than unilaterally. Its popularity notwithstanding, unilateral problem solving heightens the likelihood of challenging behavior. That's because having someone else's expectations imposed on you requires skills to handle well, and those are skills that challenging students are lacking. Better to involve the student in the process.

Adults typically solve problems with kids in one of three ways. In the CPS model, those three options are called Plan A, Plan B, and Plan C.

PLAN A —which is very popular in schools — involves solving problems unilaterally by imposing the will of adults and is often accompanied by adult-imposed consequences. Rewards for compliance and punishment for noncompliance merely add fuel to the fire.

PLAN B involves solving problems collaboratively, and consists of three steps. In the Empathy step, the adult gathers information from the student to get a clear understanding of his or her concern or perspective on an unsolved problem. Then, in the Define the Problem step, the adult introduces his or her concern or perspective about the same unsolved problem. Finally, in the Invitation step, the student and adult brainstorm realistic and mutually satisfactory solutions. By following these steps, the adults can discover durable solutions to problems, reduce the likelihood of challenging behavior, and teach important skills. (See page 28 for an example of a Plan B dialogue between adults and a student.)

PLAN C involves dropping or eliminating some unsolved problems, at least for now. A student's unsolved problems have accumulated over time, and solving them all in one fell swoop isn't realistic. Reducing challenging behavior is an incremental process. So, adults must set priorities, and Plan C is the "holding pen" for low-priority unsolved problems. This keeps everyone from becoming overwhelmed and helps adults and students focus on a few unsolved problems at a time.

CONCLUSION

Collaborative Problem Solving represents a major shift in lenses, roles, and practices for many schools. Such shifts do not come easily, and require a significant commitment by school leaders and staff. "CPS provided my staff with the tools they needed to effectively assist all students — but especially those with behavioral challenges — in accessing the education they deserve," said Thomas Ambrose, principal at Morse Street School, Freeport, Maine, the second school in which he's led implementation of the CPS model.

"The core belief that kids do well if they can and the lenses of lagging skills and unsolved problems are invaluable. But CPS also provides staff with the skills to truly hear students' concerns. The Empathy step, in particular, helps students feel valued, heard, and understood," Ambrose said.

"But CPS isn't just about Plan B. It's about ensuring that kids receive consistent, compassionate, effective help and care," Ambrose said. "At the individual level, CPS dramatically improves the relationship between staff, students, and parents. It also helps

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students come to trust that their concerns are going to be heard and addressed. It provides teachers with a sense of comfort in knowing that they have the skills to do something about problems presented by their students. Parents find this comforting as well, and they start to wear the same lenses and talk the same language, making it easier for parents and teachers to have those difficult conversations about students' challenging behavior."

Nina D'Aran, a school counselor at Central School, South Berwick, Maine, reports a similar pattern. "When my principal and I first heard about CPS, it helped us understand why our traditional school discipline program wasn't working. When we started implementing the CPS model, it helped us start getting everyone in the building on the same page, which is huge for our school. We see challenging students very differently now. We're much clearer about the factors causing their difficulties, we're all a whole lot more empathic toward them, and we're a lot clearer about what they really need from us. We're really listening to them now, we're really understanding, and

we're understanding why simply imposing our will on them wouldn't work. We're very focused on solving problems collaboratively."

D'Aran said that CPS has also changed how she communicates with parents and how parents can help their kids at home. "The biggest thing for me is the children who come with heavy-duty diagnoses. We're not leaning so heavily on special education anymore. I've seen changes in those kids and the way we've been able to make their program work for them at school. Those kids have come so far. Years ago, they would just have been sent over to a self-contained program." **K**

References

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Collaborative problem solving dialogue

What does **PLAN B** sound like? Though there's no prototype, the basic ingredients of **PLAN B** are a constant. And while some **PLAN B** discussions may actually be similar in length, most are longer and more complex.

[START EMPATHY STEP]

Mr. Talbott (assistant principal):

Shawn, why did Mrs. D'Amato send you to speak with me?

Shawn (student): Beats me.

Talbott: Well, she didn't send you down here for no reason. What happened?

Shawn: She was bugging me.

Talbott: About what?

Shawn: My fractions.

Talbott: Your fractions. What were you supposed to be doing on your fractions?

Shawn: The next worksheet.

Talbott: Was there something interfering with you doing the next worksheet?

Shawn: I guess.

Talbott: What was interfering?

Shawn: I hate fractions. They're boring.

Talbott: Can you help me under-

stand that a little better?

Shawn: I don't get how to do 'em. Since I don't get how to do 'em, I didn't finish the last worksheet. So, I was still trying to figure out how to do the last worksheet when she started bugging me to do the next one. So, then I said something.

Talbott: What'd you say?

Shawn: Maybe something like that the whole thing was stupid.

Talbott: And is that when Mrs.

D'Amato sent you to me?

Shawn: Not exactly.

Talbott: What happened next?

Shawn: She said she'd try to help me. But I said her help didn't help. Then everyone laughed. Then she sent me to you.

Talbott: I think I have the picture now. Anything else I need to know?

Shawn: No.

Talbott: I sure have been seeing you a lot lately, Shawn. And it's mostly right around now — when you're in Mrs. D'Amato's class — that you end up getting sent down here.

Shawn: Whatever. You gonna give me ISS?

Talbott: Nope, not this time.

Shawn: You suspending me?! My mom's gonna be pissed.

Talbott: No, not that. I'm going to schedule a time for me, you, and Mrs. D'Amato to solve this problem.

Shawn: She doesn't want to solve it.

Talbott: I'm betting she's pretty eager to have you understand fractions and pretty eager for you not to say things that disrupt her class. And I'm betting you're getting tired of having trouble with fractions and getting sent down here.

Shawn: I don't really care.

Talbott: You do well in a lot of your other classes so it seems to me maybe you do care. And I care. I'm tired of seeing you down here. We need to get this problem solved. I'm going to e-mail Mrs. D'Amato to find a time for you and me to meet with her. Then, we're going to figure out how to get you the help you need so you don't keep getting sent down here.

Shawn: So, I'm not getting suspended?

Talbott: No. I don't like some of the things you said in Mrs. D'Amato's class, but that doesn't mean that suspending you is going to fix it.

Shawn: So, am supposed to just go back to class?

Talbott: Not today. I want you to hang out here until this period is over. Then go to your next class. I'll let you know when you, me, and Mrs. D'Amato are going to meet to figure this out.

The next meeting starts with a return to the Empathy step.

Talbott: Shawn, as you know, I

thought it would be a good idea for you and Mrs. D'Amato to talk about how things are going for you in her class. I've already told Mrs. D'Amato that you're having trouble with fractions, and she'd like to hear more about that. She'd like to help you.

Shawn: I didn't get the stuff we were doing before fractions either. So, whatever. I'll just flunk math.

Mrs. D'Amato: I'd like to help you not flunk math.

Shawn: Your help doesn't help me.

D'Amato: Yes, you've said that before. But I still don't know what that means. And when you say that in class, it's very disruptive.

Shawn: When else would I say it? It's the only time you try to help me.

Talbott: I'm a little lost. What do you mean that's the only time Mrs. D'Amato tries to help you?

Shawn: I don't want help in front of everybody. Then everyone knows I don't get it.

Talbott: So, one concern is the timing of the help?

Shawn: Yeah, but there's no other time.

Talbott: What do you mean?

Shawn: I'm on D bus so I can't stay after for homework help. Even when I do stay after, the people who try to help me don't help me. So, I'll just flunk math, like I always do.

D'Amato: I didn't know you'd tried to get help after school.

Shawn: Well, I did. But it was a waste of time. And when I don't catch my bus, I have to sit around here until my mom can pick me up after work.

D'Amato: I understand now.

[END EMPATHY STEP]

[START DEFINE THE PROBLEM STEP]

Talbott: So, we need to find a way for you to get math help from someone who knows how to help you . . . and preferably not in front of everyone . . . and not after school.

Shawn: I would stay after school if there was someone who could help me. But I'm not staying after if no one can help me. And my mom can't help me at home. She doesn't understand my math either.

Talbott: Shawn, I'm curious. How

come you didn't go to Mrs. D'Amato for help after school?

Shawn: No offense, but your help doesn't help either.

D'Amato: I'd like to hear more about that.

Shawn, looking at Mrs. D'Amato: I don't understand it when you try to explain it.

Talbott: Shawn, can you say more about what you mean about what happens when Mrs. D'Amato tries to explain it to you?

Shawn: It's embarrassing. It's in front of everyone.

Talbott: Has Mrs. D'Amato ever tried to help you when it wasn't in front of everyone?

Shawn: No.

[END DEFINE THE PROBLEM]

[START INVITATION STEP]

Shawn, looking at Mrs. D'Amato: Can you help me sometime besides after school?

D'Amato: When do you have study hall?

Shawn: Third period.

D'Amato: I teach another class third period. What do you have fifth period?

Shawn: Lunch.

D'Amato: Me, too. Do you want to bring your lunch to my class tomorrow, and we'll see if I can help you with your math in between bites?

Shawn: Um, OK. But I don't want to do that every day. And I don't want anyone to know that's where I am.

D'Amato: Let's figure out what's hard for you first and whether I'm going to be a good explainer. Then we'll figure out how often you need my help. And no one will know . . . besides Mr. Talbott . . . where you are during lunch.

Talbott: That work for you Shawn?

Shawn: Yeah. But not forever.

Talbott: That work for you, Mrs. D'Amato?

D'Amato: Yes, it does.

Talbott: Let's go with that plan. Mrs. D'Amato, maybe you could shoot me an e-mail after you meet with Shawn tomorrow and let me know how it's going?

[END INVITATION STEP]

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